

SME Model 10 Integrated Turntable & Sumiko Celebration Cartridge



When I saw a photograph of SME's new Model 10 turntable, a beautiful open-chassis design with an integrated pick-up arm, something caught my eye that I had never seen before: near the front right, a U-shaped piece of chrome-plated tubing slanting upward, then sharply angling to the level, providing what I assumed was a small platform on which the user can rest his hand while cueing. It turns out there is more to it than that.

Ever since the space-age aesthetics of Oracle turntables swept through the audiophile community almost two decades ago, open-chassis turntables have become more and more popular, despite their user unfriendliness. I have nerves of steel when it comes to cueing by hand – provided I have something to rest my hand on. But turntables lacking a plinth force me to use cueing levers, which are never – *never* – accurate, no matter how expensive the arm. Then, too, consider the poor stylus, hanging in mid-air, wholly unprotected, waiting to be cut off at the shank by even the least careless of moves. SME fashioned this platform out of tubing, as opposed to making it solid, so that when the arm is in its cradle, the stylus will be situated within, and guarded by, the open “U.” A brilliant solution to a vexing problem.

This may seem an oblique way to begin a review of a turntable with legitimate claims to state-of-the-art, but it is indicative not only of the attention to detail but to real-world usability that characterizes the Model 10. Although it can be acquired *sans* arm (subtract \$500 from its \$6,995 price), the package as supplied is so elegant, so easy to set up and get running, and so pleasing in performance that it's difficult to imagine hungering for more.

Owing to a move in 1999, I've been essentially without vinyl for almost two years. It was thus a particular joy to take delivery of the Model 10, which Sumiko, the importer, supplied with its new Celebration, a \$1,500 moving-coil cartridge. I've

done no cartridge or arm swaps or side-by-side comparisons to competitively priced models from other manufacturers, so my remarks apply to these three components used together only. The principal reference is, as it should be, the absolute sound of music itself, not other record-playing components. After years of selling and setting up High End turntables, I've come to believe that the only meaningful evaluation of the constituent components is a systemic one.

Every turntable, arm, and cartridge has its own characteristic sound; but owing in particular to the mechanical resonances and impedances of record-playing devices, there is no way to identify that sound apart from its use, therefore its interaction, with the other two components.

The Model 10/Celebration combination brings a distinctly mellow tonal balance that nevertheless has superb definition, detail, and articulation: a sound that will appeal more to the music lover, I think, than to the audiophile as such. There is an unusual degree of richness and body that, for example, brings a warmth to Jacintha's voice in *Autumn Leaves* [Groove Note GRV-1006-1] I've not heard before and that renders her instrumental colleagues with a sweetness at once musical and natural. But resolution is such that you can clearly hear the bleed-through of every piano chord to help her maintain pitch in the a cappella first verse of “Moon River.” I do notice, however, somewhat less air and atmosphere than on the SACD version and even, to a lesser extent, the gold version in regular digital. Analog junkies overwhelmingly prefer the vinyl (though the more objective readily grant the CD's virtues), while musically sophisticated non-audiophiles tend to go for the greater detail of the digital while wishing for some of the warmth of the analog.

One of the Model 10/Celebration's real ear-openers was comparing the Bernstein *Carmen* on vinyl [DG 2709 043] and CD, which made me regret I'd given even faint praise to the latter in my five-favorites piece some issues ago. The CD is a disgrace next to my almost 30-year-old LPs: closed down, harsh, dynamically squashed, and grainy. Put on the LP and do things ever spring to life, with dynamics that seem limitless, a thoroughly natural sense of air surrounding the singers and groups of instrumentalists, and a kaleidoscope of orchestral colors splashed all over your walls. All this plus a soundstage that is one of the most theatrically convincing I know.

The Mobile Fidelity Sinatra Capitol remasterings from the Eighties sound exceptionally persuasive on the Model 10, perhaps because the Celebration cartridge, unusually kind to our standard poodle, de-emphasizes – or at least doesn't emphasize – the notorious 10-kHz peak Mo-Fi used to apply across the board to spice up its transfers. Not since the days of my Sota Cosmos/SME V/Sumiko Virtuoso combination have I enjoyed these LPs so much. However good the "Angel Eyes" from *For Only the Lonely* is in Capitol's fine 20-bit remastering, it's even better in this vinyl iteration: warmer, fuller, more dynamic, yet also airier with a lovely bloom.

And so it went, with LP after LP. This is being written during the holiday season, so I played any number of LPs of Christmas music for which there is no digital equivalent or for which the digital equivalent is substandard. Among these is Joel Cohen's wonderful *Sing We Noel: Christmas Music from England and Early America* [Nonesuch H-71354]. The CD of this is hard as nails on even the best equipment. But the vinyl, despite some groove distortion on most copies, is about as natural as you could want, with magical spatial effects, such as the way the revelers recede during the closing "Wassail," their voices resounding as they are enveloped in the acoustic. Another favorite, never transferred to CD, is the Frederick Renz ensemble's *Christemas in Anglia* [Nonesuch H-71369 – when is Elektra/Asylum going to reissue this on CD?], with its extended closing medley of Scots airs, culminating in "The Old Year Now Away Is Passed," as tasty a performance of this evocative piece as I've heard.

A few words about construction, use, and features. All aspects of the Model 10's fit, finish, and machining are standard setting at *any* price; and it offers surely the quickest, easiest, and most foolproof set-up of any state-of-the-art contender in analog right now. Leveling is via three pod-like feet on the bottom chassis that also contribute to isolation. SME's philosophy calls for a compact, albeit heavy and rigid, turntable to resist both airborne and structural feedback. Since I believe turntables should perform as specified in any room or system provided they are placed on stable structures, I used no special bases, platforms, cones, or pods in my evaluations. Under these circumstances, the Model 10 performed better than any turntable I've used except the Sota Sapphire/Cosmos models with their suspended sub-chassis, which nothing else has equaled.

Despite the presence of an REL Stadium III sub-woofer a scant eight feet away, I never experienced feedback, even on deep-bass material such as the opening of the Mehta/LA Philharmonic *Also Sprach Zarathustra* [London CS 6609], one of the few LPs – eat your heart out – that actually managed to cut the 32-foot pedal point into the grooves. Nor was there any rumble or untoward noise that I could attribute to the equipment itself. Bass was clean and articulate, without appearing excessively tight in that unrealistic "audiophile" mode. Double basses fill the room with a ripe, woody resonance, while organ music, such as that on the King's College/David Willcocks *Advent Sunday Procession* [Argo ZRG 5240], is deep and solid without boom or

hangover. It doesn't have the dark, expansive cushion you hear from some of the more massive table/arm combinations.

Speaking as a confirmed believer in vacuum-assisted platters, I am especially impressed with the mat-clamping arrangement, the only one I've used that I would seriously compare to vacuum hold-down. Put on a record, screw down the clamp, knuckle rap the surface, and you discover an unbelievably constant contact across the surface. My only complaint is the cheap, soft-vinyl dust-cover. Talk about designing a Mona Lisa and finishing her off with a rag-mop hairdo! Worse, once you manage the not-easy task of getting it over the turntable, the most meticulous care is required in removing it lest the arm be dislodged from its cradle, thus negating the advantages of the ingenious stylus-protection feature. SME should to rectify this ASAP.

The Celebration cartridge, made, so the literature tells us, from "silken [?] pearwood," looks like a light-wood version of the old Supex, and sounds rather like it, too. Sterling Trayle of Sumiko told me that both design and name were intended to celebrate analog in general and his and John Hunter's ten years with Sumiko in particular. The Alnico magnet was selected for its saturation qualities, the boron cantilever for its neutrality and excellent energy transfer, the elliptical stylus for its ease of set-up that is also less critical for optimal performance than more exotic shapes. At 0.5 mV, the output is on the verge of medium without actually getting there; I used the MC setting on the Quad Series 99 preamp with fine results. A tracking force of 2 grams is recommended; the well-damped resonance in the Model 10 arm falls in the ideal 10–12 Hz range. Tracking is better than average, but not up to the best moving-coils I've used (i.e., David Fletcher's Talisman and Virtuoso models, both out of production), to say nothing of the ease and confidence with which the flagship Shure sails over the toughest patches.

To the extent that I can judge its sound apart from the table/arm combination, I don't detect the typical rising moving-coil high end. It's a tad recessed, but seductively succulent on voices. Transients and dynamics don't leap out, transparency doesn't trumpet itself, and there are no exaggerations of imaging. "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world" might be the motto of this cartridge. If at first it seems a trifle unexciting, continue listening, and its quiet, subtle virtues will make themselves felt; after awhile you may be loath to return to more "characterful," "impressive" models.

If you gather that I am impressed with the Model 10, you gather right. Though I am not happy about a thousand-dollar price increase over its introductory \$5,995, at \$6,995 (not including cartridge), it still seems competitive, especially compared to really stratospherically priced record-playing equipment. But there are many products at this price point and lower: My reference for years, Sota, is now under new ownership and back with its superlative Cosmos and other vacuum hold-downs, which work synergistically with SME arms. And there are many competing models by Basis, VPI, Immedia, and others. Though I've not been able to compare the SME

with these, I've had past experience with some. But I'm not sure that comparisons with separates are really to the point when it comes to the Model 10. It is best viewed as a kind of state-of-the-art Rega, that is, a product in which all the thinking and most of the set-up has been done for you, with a precision of engineering, a level of execution, and a caliber of performance that no less-expensive integrated turntable known to me (and few at any price) comes close to achieving on the best day of its life.

This is one of those rare products with that difficult-to-define sense of rightness in both performance and execution. A tactile pleasure to use, a joy to listen to, it does its job without intruding upon the music, and it is a beautiful thing to behold. If you have a big LP collection and haven't upgraded in a long time, this large outlay can certainly be justified, not least because it's unlikely you'll ever have to buy another.


PAUL SEYDOR

Paul Seydor will be exploring a series of arms/cartridges in upcoming issues.

IMPORTER INFORMATION

Sumiko
2431 Fifth Street
Berkeley, California 94710
Phone: (510) 843-4500; fax: (510) 843-7120
Source: Importer loan

Price: \$6,995 (integrated); \$6,494 (without arm); Sumiko Celebration – \$1,500

SPECS

SME 10 turntable: two-speed (33/45), belt-drive, 9-pound aluminum-alloy platter, outboard AC motor

SME 10 arm: tapered magnesium tube, fixed-bearing, pivoted pick-up arm with detachable headshell and adjustable VTA, VTF, anti-skating, and azimuth and pivot to stylus distance of 9.18 inches; effective mass 9.5 grams, VTF 0–3 grams. Arm geometry is correct.

Sumiko Celebration moving-coil cartridge

Frequency response: 10Hz to 40kHz +/- 1.5 dB
Output: 0.5 mV
Separation: 30 @ 1kHz
Tracking force range: 1.8–2.2 grams (2 grams optimal)
Dynamic compliance: 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne
Stylus/cantilever: PH, ultra low-mass solid diamond elliptical on long-grain boron rod
Weight: 7 grams
Mounting: standard 2"

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Quad 99 preamp; Marsh, Quad, and Innersound amplifiers; digital by Sony (SACD), Meridian, and Musical Design/Pioneer; speakers by Quad & Sehring